Viewpoint: The Virtual Ummah

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Introduction

Conventional wisdom has long had it that the *ummah*—the worldwide Islamic community—will never become a truly cohesive entity. Presumably, the Muslim in Amman and the Muslim in Djakarta and the Muslim in Dakar and the Muslim in Toronto have little to say to each other because their languages, national cultures, and politics differ greatly, and those differences outweigh any linkage provided by their common religious beliefs.

But if satellite television and the Internet were to provide an environment conducive to Islamic discourse and serve as a platform on which to build a new level of cohesion within the *ummah* and its 1.3 billion members, global geopolitical balances might be altered significantly.

A Very Different World

Policymakers would be wise to consider how even a partially unified ummah would make for a very different world. The Muslim community comprises much more than the Middle East, although that region receives the most attention from governments and the public. It is the Arab population nearly quintupled and spread across the globe. If this massive group were to develop a meaningful level of unity, its potential power could be enormous and crafting policy related to the community of Islam would become a far more challenging task.

That prospect is not as farfetched as it once seemed, primarily because of the reach and speed of new mass media. The surge of anger in reaction to the 2005 *Newsweek* story about desecration of the *Qur'an* at the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the swift spread of the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy illustrated how a story told on television and computer screens can quickly resonate in the farthest reaches of the Muslim world.

Media-Based Cohesion

Prospects for media-based cohesion are enhanced by the nature of new information and communications technologies. Members of dispersed groups, wherever they are, can collect news from sources ranging from *Al Jazeera* to individual bloggers. In addition to people in

predominantly Muslim countries, deracinated Muslim communities in Europe and elsewhere may be particularly eager to connect to media offerings that engender a sense of belonging and provide electronic ties to home and religion. How this may affect assimilation of Muslims who live in largely non-Muslim environments is not yet known. It could provide a reassuring comfort zone that makes their new home amidst a different culture seem less threatening because links to the larger Islamic world can be maintained through media. Or, those virtual connections might make that former homeland seem close enough at hand to make integration into the new community appear less necessary or desirable.

The *Qur'an* (49:10) says, "The believers are a band of brothers." This principal is at the heart of the idea of the *ummah,* although it has been interpreted in different ways concerning matters such as inclusiveness. Anthony Shadid defines it in historical context as "the notion of an Islamic community created when Mohammed's disparate followers began to look beyond their clan and tribal affiliations in Arabia to see themselves foremost as Muslims." Today, some Islamic scholars and political figures, such as Ali Bulac and Abul-Ela Maadi, have asserted that the *ummah* should be a broad-based, modern alternative to Western-style secular civil society, but should still be democratic.[1]

Although Olivier Roy contends that globalization "is de-ethnicizing Islam," can a religion-based virtual state override other facets of individual cultures and ethnicities?[2]

Enduring Cultural Differences

Cultural differences have not been swept away. Writing from Indonesia in the aftermath of the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy, Karim Raslan observed: "Yes, we are part of the extended family of believers, the *ummah.* We cannot help but feel some sense of solidarity with our co-religionists in Damascus, Tehran, or Cairo. But the explosiveness of the Arab street doesn't translate, somehow, to the tropics. Many of us have a growing suspicion that we are culturally different from our Arabic- and Urdu-speaking brethren, perhaps more tolerant and less emotional."[3]

Information flows affect the political character of Islam. Satellite television and the Internet have brought the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis—and, more recently, the war between Hizbollah and Israel—to a global audience. In spring 2002 a Zogby poll found that 65 percent of Indonesians rated Palestine as "the most important" or "a very important" issue, and the 2003 Pew Global Attitudes Survey reported that in Indonesia 68 percent of poll respondents named Yasser Arafat as the world figure in whom they had most confidence.[4] Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's second-in-command, recognized this and wrote in his book *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*: "The fact that must be acknowledged is that the issue of Palestine is the cause that has been firing up the feelings of the Muslim nation from Morocco to Indonesia for the past 50 years."[5]

Communications media can make the remote seem proximate, particularly when news is presented in real time and by so many providers. In this way the Palestinian or resident of Qana becomes a neighbor of the Indonesian, and within the global village a neighbor's plight attracts much interest. That is not to say, however, that a single political outlook will take hold throughout the Muslim world or that priorities will be uniform.

One reason there is so much uncertainty about Islamic connections is that attitudes about Muslim identity vary from country to country, even in predominantly Muslim nations. A *Pew Global Attitudes* survey published in 2005 asked, "Do you consider yourself a national citizen first or a Muslim first?" These were the answers from Muslim respondents in six countries:

- Pakistan : national citizen 7 percent; Muslim 79 percent.
- Morocco : national citizen 7 percent; Muslim 70 percent.
- Jordan : national citizen 23 percent; Muslim 63 percent.
- Turkey : national citizen 29 percent; Muslim 43 percent.
- Indonesia : national citizen 35 percent; Muslim 39 percent.
- Lebanon : national citizen 30 percent; Muslim 30 percent.[6]

These results were affected by the political and cultural characteristics of the individual countries and indicate that shifts might occur within a given country depending on the politics of the moment or particular events, perhaps including how news is covered and information is provided through the Internet or other sources. The results from Lebanon, for instance, presumably reflected the nationalist tremors that were shaking that country around the time the polling was done. Blogs and websites, as well as traditional media, helped fuel the surge in nationalist political activism there, as was evident after the assassination in 2005 of Rafik Hariri.

Unifying the Ummah

Pulling the *ummah* closer together is not a new idea. In the twentieth century, groundwork was laid by men such as Haasan al-Banna, a founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Beginning in the 1920s, he championed "the Islamization of society." His movement, according to Reza Aslan, "represented the first modern attempt to present Islam as an all-encompassing religious, political, social, economic, and cultural system. Islam, in al-Banna's view, represented a universal ideology superior to all other systems of social organization the world had known."[7] Another Egyptian Islamist, Sayyid Qutb, endorsed a transterritorial *ummah* unified by Islamic governance.[8] Now, four decades after Qutb's death, "transterritorial" has an expanded meaning as the concept is reshaped by technologies that make conventional boundaries less relevant. Olivier Roy has observed that the *ummah* "no longer has anything to do with a territorial entity. It has to be thought of in abstract or imaginary terms."[9]

Roy's point is grounded in the realities of new media and access to information. While satellite television is transnational, the Internet may be considered *supra*national because boundaries within and among states are not merely inconsequential, they need not, in the cyberworld, exist at all. An example of how this theory takes shape in practice can be seen in the success of *Islam Online* (www.islamonline.net), which provides news, general information about Islam, "*shari'ah* corner" featuring "live *fatwa*", and much more, all available in Arabic and English. (The Arabic and English sites have different staff members, content, and audiences, and one rarely translates material from the other.) The site lists among its goals: "To strengthen the ties of unity and affiliation between the members of the Islamic community and support informational and cultural exchange. To expand awareness of important events in the Arab, Islamic and larger worlds. To build confidence and a spirit of hope among Muslims."

In early 2006, *Islam Online* was attracting an average of about 13 million page views and 1.5 million unique visitors per month, and its management wants to expand this audience by offering content in additional languages, such as French and Turkish. It employs about 300 staff members, most working in Cairo, and uses material from approximately 1,500 correspondents, Islamic scholars, and other contributors, many of whom are not Muslims. For the English-language version, which attracts 25 percent of the page views, about half the audience is in the United States.

For *Islam Online* and other such media organizations, translated material is an essential part of reaching a truly global audience. *Al Jazeera* made its name through its Arabic newscasts and

then attracted much attention when it announced plans for English-language *Al Jazeera International*. There was considerable public discussion, especially in the non-Islamic world, about how this channel's content and political tone might differ from that of the Arabic channel, and how it would be received by Western audiences and governments. Because of the hostility toward *Al Jazeera* from some quarters—notably the U.S. government—the potential expansion of *Al Jazeera's* influence was viewed with concern, despite the new channel, as it was gradually unveiled, looking more like *CNN* or the *BBC* than its Arabic sibling.

While this was debated and *Al Jazeera International's* launch was delayed due to technical problems (and, some insiders say, the antipathy of the Arab channel's journalists toward their mostly non-Arab *AJI* colleagues), the parent organization's management quietly announced that it would also begin *Al Jazeera Urdu*. With editorial content and translation supervised by the *Al Jazeera* bureau in Pakistan, this channel will, once underway, consist primarily of the Arabic channel's contents dubbed into Urdu for a potential audience estimated at 110 million. *Al Jazeera* also plans to eventually deliver its product in additional languages, such as Turkish.

Again from policymakers' standpoint, the potential political repercussions of this venture are worth considering. If one accepts the argument (debatable though it may be) that *Al Jazeera's* Arabic coverage features an anti-American slant that rouses "the Arab street" against U.S. and other Western interests, delivering that coverage to an additional huge Muslim audience could significantly affect the wider contest for global public opinion. And if it reinforces an "us-against-them" mentality among its viewers, it may escalate the adversarial nature of their relationship with the non-Islamic West—something else that U.S. policy planners must weigh.

Regardless of what the West does, effects of such globalized media influence may be enhanced by the disillusionment some Muslims feel toward secular citizenship in their own states. As Olivier Roy asks, "What is a true Muslim land, in a time when many radical Muslims consider that all the regimes ruling Muslim countries are illegitimate?"[10] For these Muslims, who feel greater loyalty to Islam itself than to any particular homeland, the *ummah* as superstate may be the "true Muslim land," tangible or not.

The Internet as New Public Space

In a virtual community, writes Jon Anderson, the Internet serves as "a new public space, which enables a new class of interpreters, who are facilitated by this medium to address and thereby to reframe Islam's authority and expression for those like themselves and others who come there." The virtual space, says Anderson, "does not facilitate the spokesperson-activists of established institutions, but draws instead on a broader range of new interpreters or newly visible interpreters of Islam."[11]

Among these is Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who, through his presence on *Al Jazeera* and *Islam Online*, has established himself as one of the Islamic world's best-known public figures. Born in 1926, al-Qaradawi studied theology at al-Azhar University and spent time in an Egyptian prison camp because of his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. He has written about the Islamic awakening—his many books have sold in the hundreds of thousands—and emphasized the important role of the *ulama*—religious scholars—as its leaders. He has championed the independence of the *ulama* and argued that Islam requires freedom of thought and discussion.[12]

Al-Qaradawi has proved himself adept at shaping his message to meet the demands of new media. As Anderson notes, he is "wholly orthodox in theology but expressing it in a more modern idiom that attracts a transnational audience among professional middle classes."[13] Modern does not mean moderate. Al-Qaradawi has endorsed suicide bombing attacks on Israeli civilians as a legitimate tactic in the effort to reclaim Muslim territory.[14] He also, however, issued a *fatwa* that defends democracy not as a form of unbelief but as a system that properly gives people the

right to choose their leaders without compulsion and to question and remove them.[15] On another occasion, he denounced the now deceased Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, as a murderer.

Whatever Al-Qaradawi's views on particular issues, he unquestionably wields greater influence by virtue of being a media personality. His political clout as "the global mufti" is enhanced by the reach and frequency that satellite television and the Internet provide.

The Qur'an Online

Beyond personalities, the *Qur'an* is central to Islam's online presence. This is, in part, a function of *da'wah*, the rallying of believers to the faith or, as some would have it, the exhortation to return to pre-modern, unblemished Islam. (Those who advocate this approach apparently see no irony in using the Internet to turn back the clock.) Even websites that present news and softer features place primary emphasis on the religion itself. The *IslamiCity* website (www.islamicity.com) streams *Radio Al Islam*, which offers calls to prayer, recitations of the *Qur'an,* tools to aid in searching the *Qur'an's* content and memorizing the text, as well as locating mosques and determining local times for prayer.

Unlike the holy books of other religions, the *Qur'an* is considered to be the untouched word of God, as revealed to God's messenger, Mohammed, who then recited it. This is the essence of its sacred nature. Its recitation remains central to the practice of Islam, so when it is broadcast or presented online, its words and rhythms find a large and rapt audience. Just as the muezzins' call to prayer brings people to mosques, so too does a media-delivered call or recitation pull together the virtual community.

The digital *minbar,* or cyber-pulpit, is of special importance to diasporic Muslims. It should be noted that even in far-flung centers of Muslim immigration such as Paris, London, and New York, imams and mosques quickly establish themselves, and so Muslim residents there do not need to depend solely on a virtual connection for religious sustenance. As a platform for globalized Islam, however, online offerings may have special allure: a connection to a nostalgia-misted past and a remedy for homesickness.

In reality, economic hardship and political conflict may have made this earlier life far less attractive than it appears in memory. Nevertheless, new media may create such a convenient bridge across distance and time that a website or a satellite channel can become cherished as a tie to real or imagined "home." Peter Mandaville notes that "more than anything else, the Internet and other information technologies provide spaces where Muslims, who often find themselves to be a marginalized or extreme minority group in many Western communities, can go in order to find others 'like them.'"[16]

Globalization of Islam and the Media

Al Jazeera's approach to certain news stories illustrates how globalized journalism can affect globalized Islam. Sam Cherribi writes that *Al Jazeera* used its coverage of the banning of the *hijab,* a veil, from French schools "to build a global Muslim identity [and] mobilize a shared public opinion." According to Cherribi, *Al Jazeera* framed the veil story in its reporting from 2002-2005 as "not only a problem for girls and women in public schools in France; it is a problem for Muslim women and men around the world." The veil coverage, he says, was part of a "civilization message" delivered by *Al Jazeera*, in this case because "the veil gives the immediate recognition of otherness: non-Muslims do not wear it."[17] Cherribi argues that Al Jazeera is a religious channel, more *CBN* than *CNN*, with an agenda that focuses on Islam even above pan-Arabism. Others, however, contend that *Al Jazeera's* content is relatively balanced when it addresses

religious topics, reflecting the intricate spider web of Islamism and pan-Arabism that is part of the mindset of many of the people who live in the Arab world and watch that channel.

Beyond the news coverage of specific issues, the importance of new media is found in its providing an arena where the future of Islam will be contested. This takes place on several levels: doctrinal debate between moderates and conservatives about defining the beliefs and practices of "true Islam," and political argument about Islam's stance toward the non-Islamic world. For those who argue that Islam is not a party to a "clash of civilizations" but is instead undergoing an internal struggle to determine its direction, the huge number of media venues—particularly online—provides the opportunity to watch the various sides present their cases.

For this direction-setting process, the Internet and satellite television transform and transcend traditional hierarchies. Robert Hefner notes that "the classically educated scholars (*ulama*) who long dominated the religious tradition awoke to face a host of new challengers, including secularly educated new Muslim intellectuals, independent preachers, Internet Islamists, and other beneficiaries of new technologies and organizations."[18] By expanding the number of voices to which a mass audience may listen, the Internet, writes Merlyna Lim, "tremendously enhances the prospects for an egalitarian type of communications in which every voice is potentially as important as another….By learning from the Internet, people can feel they have acquired enough Islamic knowledge to guide important life decisions without having recourse to more traditional scholars such as an imam or Islamic teachers in local mosques. At the same time, radical fundamentalist groups can also use the Internet…[to] directly reach ordinary Muslims in cyberspace."[19]

Another aspect of Islam being affected by the Internet is the role of Arabic. Much as the Catholic Church relied for centuries on Latin, regardless of whether people understood it, many Islamic *ulama* insist that Arabic is the true language of Islam because it was spoken by Mohammed and so even non-Arabic speakers should learn at least enough of the language to be able to recite parts of the *Qur'an* in it. In theory, the common language should further Islamic unity.

A single language that everyone within the *ummah* could speak might make increased cohesion more feasible, but in practice, reliance on Arabic is intrinsically limiting. Most Muslims do not speak Arabic, and Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson note that "while Arabic remains a universal medium at one level, language differences within the Muslim world significantly constrain the circulation of ideas. Some Indonesian religious intellectuals, often trained in the United States and Canada, interpret developments in the Arab world, but virtually no Arab intellectuals follow debates on Muslim intellectual and political life in Southeast Asia."[20]

With the Internet providing information in many languages, particularly English, dependence on Arabic is reduced and the audience expands. Jocelyne Cesari says that abandonment of Arabic and other ancestral languages "has led to the growth of 'vernacular' forms of Islam in Europe and America, where sermons, religious literature, and public discussions are increasingly in English, which has now become the second language of Muslims all over the *ummah.*"[21] Traditionalists may lament the disincentive to learn Arabic, but an increased number of languages used in information dissemination could enable more people to feel that they are truly part of the *ummah* and could contribute to the cohesion that new communications technologies may foster. This acceptance of linguistic diversity is particularly important for websites and blogs, which within a short time have grown spectacularly in their number and range of outlook.

Sufism, which is criticized by some fundamentalists as non-Islamic while its advocates say it is the true essence of Islam, has seen its tenets debated and its visibility increased through new media. Carl Ernst writes that Sufi websites have been primarily created by one segment of the Sufi population: "members of the cosmopolitan and globalizing classes: either emigrant Sufi leaders establishing new bases in America and Europe, immigrant technocrats who happen to be connected to Sufi lineages, or Euro-American converts to Sufism in one form or another." Ernst

also notes that one Sufi leader in Southeast Asia, when asked if he was interested in setting up a website, said, "We are not vendors who hawk our wares in the bazaar…people come to us." But his Malaysian followers have set up an online site on which they sell English-language publications by leading masters of the order.[22]

Building a Global Ummah

One example of the Web being used specifically to build a global *ummah* can be seen in the online presence of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Party of Liberation, which is reportedly active in at least 40 countries. Its cyber-presence—with a principal website available in Arabic, English, Russian, Turkish, Urdu, and German—illustrates how a broader *ummah* might coalesce through use of the Internet.

According to *Globalsecurity.org*, Hizb ut-Tahrir is "a radical Islamic political movement that seeks 'implementation of pure Islamic doctrine' and the creation of an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia....The ultimate goal of this secretive sectarian group is to unite the entire *ummah*, or Islamic world community, into a single caliphate."[23] Although no acts of violence have been directly attributed to Hizb ut-Tahrir, several governments have labeled it a terrorist organization. As of July 2006, the party was not on the U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist groups, but in Russia and some Central Asian countries, Hizb ut-Tahrir activists have been jailed, with a flurry of arrests in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in mid-2006.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, writes Zeyno Baran, "has essentially constructed a virtual Islamist community in cyberspace, frequented by members, prospective members, and sympathizers. Hizb ut-Tahrir's websites are designed to draw in Web-surfing Muslims who feel alienated from the societies in which they live, providing them with a place to obtain news and analysis, exchange ideas, and feel part of a global Muslim community."[24]

Hizb ut-Tahrir relies on cyberspace as a political location in which organizing a virtual state can take place. Except for occasions when the party undertakes localized activity, such as protesting a proposed British anti-terrorism statute, conventional borders are disregarded and traditional sovereignty is also treated as irrelevant. The *ummah* as righteous political entity supersedes such secular constraints, and cyberspace rather than conventionally defined territory is seen as a congenial home for the *ummah*.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, Al Jazeera, Islam Online, and other ventures using new media may have varied political goals or business plans, but they all aspire to build global constituencies and to do so with Islam at the heart of their efforts.

Despite the opportunities afforded by new communications and information technologies, obstacles to Islamic unity remain formidable. Muslim-versus-Muslim warfare in Iraq displays the deep wounds sectarianism can inflict. On a less sanguinary level, Muslims' worldviews differ so much that finding common ground for a Sufi mystic and a Hizb ut-Tahrir strategist may be difficult. Fundamentalist and modernist may each feel strongly that the other is following a path toward disaster. Such diversity does not mean that the *ummah* cannot come together, but if it does it will be loosely knit.

It would, however, still be a significant geopolitical presence, and the weave of its fabric could be tightened by external factors, such as a perceived common foe. The same new media that contribute to cohesion in the first place will deliver information that can increase unity. When images from Gaza and Lebanon in 2006 showed the agony of fellow Muslims, the reports that were most trusted were being provided by Arab/Muslim news organizations that are highly credible among their particular regional and global audiences. When their reports reach

households in Cairo, Karachi, Djakarta, and Paris, Muslims feel the pain of other Muslims and reflexively seek the embrace of the community of Islam.

Islam has no monopoly on high-tech communication tools. Other religions also use them; Christian websites and blogs outnumber all others. Other diasporic communities rely on satellite channels and online forums to sustain identity. But Islam and the members of the global Muslim community are different. At this point in history, Islam is affecting how much of the world works and is a factor in many of the world's armed conflicts. That is why it makes sense for the United States, among others, to devise a policy toward the *ummah* as well as toward nations.

For good or ill, Islam is a special case, and policy makers in the United States and elsewhere in the non-Islamic world should more seriously contemplate how a realized *ummah* might change the world.

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